

Outline

I. In this approach I will combine traditional categories of philosophy with contemporary information to reflect on the nature of the fetus. I perceive the role of philosophy as one of appeal to reason and observation of the senses, to provide principles upon which to base decisions. Differs from theology, which uses revelation and faith, and science which uses empirical research.

A. Philosophers consider how matter is organized by form (since Aristotle).

1. The form is what organizes matter into a particular kind of thing. It determines the shape or identity of the thing. With Aristotle the form alone was called the essence, but for St. Thomas in the case of human beings, the essence also included the matter or body in the individual act of existence.

2. When we reflect on the human being we discover an extremely complex being with a hierarchy of what Lonergan calls "conjugate forms" each of which organizes an aspect of the individual.

a. from sub-atomic particles

b. to atomic particles. For example, wonder that an adult human being as 10 to the 27 hydrogen atoms, each of which is estimated to have existed relatively unchanged for 14 billion years.

c. to single cells (<sup>Scientific base</sup> identified over 1000 chemical changes in a single cell)

d. to multiple celled biological systems

3. These systems are organized into a single existing being with organic life, plants, animals, mammals, human beings, and so forth with the higher conjugate form integrating the informed lower entities

a. Philosophically this phenomena of increasingly higher levels of organization of organic life is explained through the elaboration of the form of the entity which is now called 'a soul' because there is life within the organism

b. The soul organizes the matter in a particular way and gives the entity certain powers associated with life. It is not something extra added to the material entity, it is the life and operation of the entity itself, the essence and the act of existence in the case of human beings.

c. We describe the soul as having certain powers:

1. a vegetative or nutritive power, or the power to ingest and transform external material for nutrition.

2 Then an organism has the power of reproduction, or the capacity to produce organisms of the same kind as itself. In other words, the form of the material organic entity can be reproduced. At lower levels, this can happen with a single entity, but with more complex organisms reproduction demands the interaction of two differentiated members of the same kind, of the male and the female.

3. Increasingly complex powers of soul include the power of locomotion, or movement from place to place which proceeds from simple movement towards the sun in plants, to movement from place to place in higher forms of animal life.

f. The powers of sensation include the five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. These are present in varying degrees in different species of animals. They all demand a range of consciousness which reveals a new capacity to organize and direct matter in these more complex entities.

5. With the presence of rationality we have the power of the form or soul that is considered to be unique to the human being. Theologically this power of intellect is described as being "in the image and likeness of God". This means that a human being, from the moment of existence is "participate existence" with God. So we can say that the origin and the terminus of human life is the same.

Philosophically the human being is described as having the potential for self-reflection, the potential for exercise of freedom of will in choices, and the potential for the exercise of human acts such as the giving of the self to another, and the potential to build up human community.

We need to distinguish the fullness of the operation of these powers from their potential and even partial operation. The terminus or end of human life is the perfection of the operation of these powers. This is a way of achieving our terminus by living participate existence with God who is pure Act. For most of us, this perfection of the operations of our soul takes an entire lifetime to achieve.

a. Again traditionally the powers of the rational soul allow a human being to actively seek truth, and actively choose what is perceived as good. It is the perfection of these

activities that we seek, that is knowledge of the truth and choice of the good.

b. If we think of a human being philosophically, given the above description, we must marvel that we are an extremely complex organism which organizes the matter of our being ranging from sub-atomic particles, atomic particles, cells, systems, to the highest powers of intellect, which allow us to choose the good, to pursue the truth, and to build up human community. We need to reflect with awe and wonder about what an astonishing thing it is to be a human being.

c. Bernard Lonergan in Insight describes the combined complexity and order in the human being as follows:

"Organic, psychic, and intellectual development are not three independent processes. They are interlocked with the intellectual providing a higher integration of the psychic and the psychic providing a higher integration of the organic. Each level involves its own laws, its flexible circle of schemes of recurrence, its interlocked set of conjugate forms. Each set of forms stands in an emergent correspondence to otherwise coincidental manifolds on the lower levels. Hence, a single human action can involve a series of components, physical, chemical, organic, neural, psychic, and intellectual, and the several components occur in accord with the laws and realized schemes of their appropriate levels." (470)

d. Using the concept of 'sets of conjugate forms,' as Lonergan describes, we can now turn to a consideration of the fetus as subject, the theme of tonight's discussion.

B. The fetus is a developing human being with 'sets of conjugate forms'

1. First we have to consider the relation of the fetus to the adult human being just described.

a. The *Law Reform Commission of Canada* in its Working Paper #58 entitled Protection of Life: Crimes against the Foetus distinguishes the following stages of development of the fetus: zygote (fertilized egg), embryo (stage of development between fertilization and completion of basic organ development), and foetus (the stage following the embryonic period until birth or abortion.) (8)

b. From the philosophical perspective described above, we can say that from the moment of fertilization, the new zygote has an internal ordering principle or form that determines the developing structure of its matter as it sets off a series of

responses in the body of the mother. From the moment of its existence there is a human essence.

c. The zygote is "a developing human being" with the requisite 46 chromosomes common to human life. It differs from the unfertilized egg in that it has its own capacity to organize its own matter right from the beginning. ( Science is tracing these developments for us with great precision: first the powers of nutrition are operative in the formation of the blastocyst, then at three weeks a primitive heart and some nerve cells; at six weeks the eyes, and 7 weeks more than 100,000 new nerve cells every minute, at 8 weeks the hands and eye lid, so that by 11 weeks the primitive structure of body is entirely formed, and by 14 weeks it begins to operate its locomotive powers, and by 28 weeks its powers of sensation are operative to the extent that if a physician peers into the uterus with a fetoscope, the fetus will try to shield its eyes with its hands)

d. Important to note, therefore, that my essence as a human being is not the same thing as my operation as a human being. At the moment of my conception, as a zygote, as an embryo, and as a fetus, I do not have the fullness of my operation as a human being. At moment of conception the fetus is not able to have perfect operation of intellect, perfect choice, even to have phantasms. Its development needs to be magnified by other human beings. My essence, what I am, differs from the fullness of my existence, or how I am.

e. Even after birth this development is not complete. A two year old does not have the perfection of intellect or choice. So the first phase of growth is one of developing the operation of our powers as a human being. Then we can move into the perfecting of the operation of the powers...which takes a lifetime.

d. There are many philosophical questions that can flow from this preliminary description of the fetus as a developing human being.

1. What is the relation between what could be called a 'human being' and what can be called 'a person'? Should we reserve person for a human being who is approaching the perfection of the operation of his or her powers of soul with a community of other persons?

2. Do all human beings have a 'right' to exist and to develop? From the first moment of existence, because by existing as participate being, human beings have a right to continue their existence and to development, or to reach their proper terminus.

3. Do human beings have an obligation to protect the developing human being in its growth? All human development at the

early stages is dependent upon other human beings, for nourishment, for education, for growth. Justice is the constant and perpetual will to help those in need. Who is more in need than a human being who is completely dependent upon other human beings for life and growth?

4. How does innocence invite particular kinds of human action? Killing is only justified in Catholic natural law theory when several conditions are fulfilled. One of these is that the individual being killed is an 'unjust aggressor'. How can a developing human being, in his or her innocence, be considered in any way 'an unjust aggressor'?

This view coincides with the following passage from the recent Instruction on Respect for Human Life?

The Magisterium has not expressly committed itself to an affirmation of a philosophical nature, but it constantly reaffirms the moral condemnation of any kind of procured abortion. This teaching has not been changed and is unchangeable.

Thus the fruit of human generation, from the first moment of its existence, that is to say from the moment the zygote has formed, demands the unconditional respect that is morally due to the human being in his bodily and spiritual totality. The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception; and therefore from that same moment his rights as a person must be recognized, among which in the first place is the inviolable right of every innocent human being to life. (14)

Conclusion: This philosophical description of the human being as participate existence from the first moment of existence, is supported by the theological belief of Christians in the significance of the Incarnation of the Messiah who was conceived as 'fully human' and 'fully God'. The Word became Flesh and dwelt among us from the moment of the annunciation. For all of us, from the first moment of our existence we were never apart from God. Our origin and our cause is also our end or terminus. We are also dying or corrupting from the first moment of our existence. So the importance of the Incarnation flows into the destiny of the Redemption. Analogously our destiny was built into our conception. Therefore, we need to reflect on the seriousness of any human act that would interrupt this dynamism of growth and development towards perfection and the fullness of participation in the life of God.